

The Treasure of Trash

Center offers waste second chance

by Lorna Schuster
Sunburst Staff Writer

When employees of Southwest Disposal took over the recycling center office at Holloman five years ago, a phone on the floor was all they had to start with. In spite of the sparse beginnings, they soon filled the office with desks, chairs and other items that might have otherwise gone to waste. It was just a matter of renewing, reusing and recycling.

"Even the fish tank in our office had fish in it when we picked it up in base housing," said Gary Bidelman, recycling center coordinator. "Since then we've had several people bring fish out here to be recycled."

Though fish are not on the usual list of recyclables, the Air Force and Air Combat Command require Holloman to have a recycling center to reduce the tonnage of refuse sent to the landfill. The goal is to divert 35 percent.

"By diverting a portion of the garbage to recycling, we pay less to dump in the landfills and do our part to clean up the environment," said Lucio Vazquez, refuse and recycling contract manager. "Any way we can recycle is worth it."

Three to four of the center's truck drivers circle the base housing areas on Wednesdays to pick up recyclables from the blue containers allotted to each household.

Materials that can be recycled include plastic, all types of paper, all types of cardboard, tin and aluminum cans. However, the center doesn't have the proper equipment to recycle glass. And the items have to be sorted by hand so that the glass and other non-recyclables don't accidentally get bundled with the rest.

At times, people in housing have confused the blue recycling container for another garbage container and inappropriate waste shows up in the recycling.

"We get dirty diapers. There are facilities that can recycle dirty diapers, but we're not one of them," Bidelman said. "We also find clothing, yard waste and cat litter in the containers. And during the recent winter holidays we saw a lot of turkey carcasses. We'll recycle the containers that you cook turkeys in but not the turkey itself."

As the first few truckers haul away the usual items, the last one picks up all the grass, weeds, and tree branches. Yard waste is taken next door to the wood yard to be turned into compost.

"The compost is a combination of finely ground yard waste and manure from the stables here on base," Vazquez said. "The compost is free to anyone on base."

While cardboard is picked up on Mondays and Fridays, the recycling team picks up industrial recyclables Thurs-



James Pinson picks up mattresses in base housing using a machine made specifically to pick up bulky waste .

days. These materials include paper, plastic, aluminum and tin cans all baled together. Plastic foam inside the cardboard packing and paper McDonald bags are not recyclable and have to be sorted out after they are dropped off at the center.

Sorting the trash out of the recyclables is time-consuming work, but according to Bidelman the most challenging aspect of the job at the recycling center is the weather. The majority of the facility is outside, exposing those who sort the materials to harsh winds or extreme temperatures. Dust storms in particular can really impede progress.

Despite the weather last year, the center took in 342,830 pounds of industrial and 326,600 pounds of residential recyclables. All metals not baled in with other material were combined and came to 174,979 pounds.

"Even though these are all big numbers, compared to what goes to the landfill, it's still not that much," Bidelman said. "But with the holiday packing materials this last December, we did manage to divert 35 percent of what would normally go to the landfill. As long as team Holloman continues to do its part, we will continue to do ours."



Gary Bidelman uses a bobcat to load a bale of recycled paper onto a semi trailer to be transported to El Paso.



James Pinson throws cardboard onto the belt of a horizontal baler to bound the material together.

Photos by Airman 1st Class Vanessa LaBoy



Richard Gustafuson sorts through a pile of recyclable material.



Ronnie Ogden makes his runs through base housing picking up recyclable crates and cardboard material.